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Elements of Neutrality in Belarusian Foreign Policy and National Security Policy

Siarhei Bohdan
Gumer Isaev

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Ostrogorski Centre
www.ostrogorski.org

Minsk
minsk@ostrogorski.org

London
london@ostrogorski.org

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Executive summary

- Although the 1994 Constitution of Belarus established its aim to become a neutral state, Belarusian neutrality remained a fiction for many years as Minsk remained a loyal ally of Russia.

- However, since the late 2000s the Belarusian government has pursued policies demonstrating effective neutrality. This was the result of a series of ad hoc decisions by Belarusian leadership regarding the major issues of the country's foreign and national security policies.

- Minsk avoided siding with Russia in its assertive policy in the former Soviet Union and the Middle East, developed relations with Russia' opponents and opposed the redrawing of post-Soviet borders. Concurrently, the Belarusian government reviewed its own national security policies, limited Russian military presence within its borders and increased the autonomy of the Belarusian armed forces and security agencies.

- Some Russian commentators have accused Minsk of "drifting" to the West. However, Minsk avoids challenging or confronting Moscow. The policy it now pursues can be better described as neutrality.

- Currently existing elements of neutrality in the policies of the Belarusian state are more a result of ad hoc survival manoeuvres by the Belarusian state in reaction to Russia's ever more revisionist policies than a conceptually grounded strategy or a solemnly proclaimed tenet of government policies. It resembles other known neutrality models, especially the Finnish one (after WWII) as far as its context and certain conceptual traits are concerned.

- The prospects of Belarusian neutrality remain uncertain, as both the East and West have yet to fully accept this status. Neither Moscow, nor the West, nor neighbouring states seem to take Belarusian neutrality seriously.

1. Introduction

Around 2006, the first signs of neutrality began to appear in Belarusian foreign and national security policies. This trend has increased in the past decade. For a long time, these elements of neutrality were misinterpreted as Minsk opportunistically moving back and forth between Moscow and the West or tactically balancing different directions of its policy. Yet by the mid-2010s, these elements of neutrality became a reliable part of Belarusian foreign and national security policy.

This naturally leads one to question whether neutrality is a viable option for the future development of the Belarusian state. For the purposes of this study, neutrality is defined on the basis of modern-time political practice rather than formal legal concepts. Therefore, neutrality here means policies aimed at maintaining distance from political and military blocks and parties to conflicts, although this distance differs depending on specific circumstances. It may include formal membership in associations of political and military integration, as well as bilateral security-related arrangements, as long as they do not crucially affect the international position of the country.

This paper aims to investigate the elements of neutrality in Belarusian foreign policy and national security policy of recent years. Is neutrality an "elephant in the room" of Belarusian politics, a building block for the future policies of the Belarusian state, or simply a short-time mixture of contradictory phenomena that could be better described using other terms?

Given the extent of Belarusian-Russian entanglement, this paper focuses on the differences between Minsk and Moscow as the main reference point for study. All Belarusian attempts to assert neutrality necessarily start with changing the nature of interaction between Belarus and Russia.

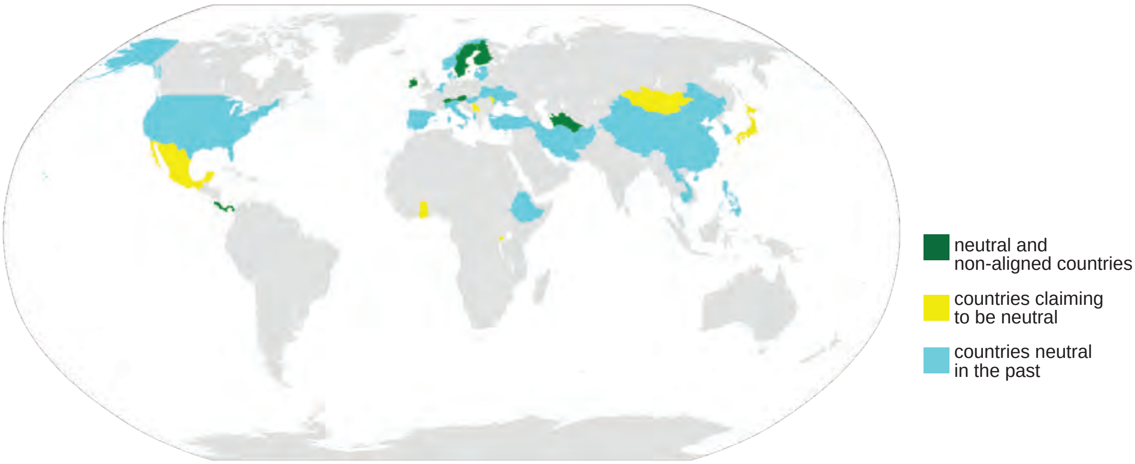
To answer the questions above we will look at the issues in which Minsk's policy differed from Russia's without siding with its opponents. The paper analyses these positions in a broader international context and assesses the extent to which they are opportunistic or, on the contrary, principled.

Analysis of probable elements of neutrality in Belarusian national security policy proves more difficult. Nevertheless, even such a constrained investigation clarifies whether emerging neutrality elements in policies of the Belarusian government are limited to foreign policy or whether they can be found in other political spheres as well.

The paper concludes by examining the prospects of Belarus's emerging neutrality and the factors that will determine its success or failure. Although contemporary Belarus is definitely not the best place to implement neutrality principles, it has very few other options – if any – that can ensure the survival and development of a politically, economically and militarily viable Belarusian statehood.

2. The concept of neutrality

This part of the paper examines the major principles of the concept of neutrality as practiced by different countries. “Nonalignment” and “neutrality” are the terms usually used to determine the international status of a state that does not participate in wars between other states, and is not part of a military block in peacetime.



The world’s neutral nations. Image: Wikipedia

The neutral status of a state may have both internal and external reasons and is dependent on the system of international relations. For example, in the history of the second half of the 20th century, countries turned to neutrality in order to preserve their sovereignty in the bipolar system of international relations. The decision to be or not to be part of a military block or organisation was made under various circumstances.

For the purposes of this study, the following aspects of the neutrality phenomenon shall be highlighted:

Permanent or temporary neutrality

Neutrality status may be permanent, i.e., effective both in times of war and peace. According to a normative view, neutral status during war means that the given state does not take part in hostilities. For example, during WWII Sweden and Turkey were neutral. This does not mean that the neutral state has no relations with the belligerent countries, but rather that these relations remain limited by the principle of non-alignment in war. During peace time, neutrality means not taking part in military alliances. Permanent neutrality **may be considered** as the long-term strategy of a state. For some countries neutrality has become an element of national identity (Switzerland, Turkmenistan).

Voluntary or internationally agreed neutrality

Sometime, the ruling elite can make a deliberate decision to establish neutrality, as was the case in Sweden. Unlike the neutrality of Finland, Switzerland, and Austria, Swedish neutrality has no roots in international agreements[1]. In the Swedish case geopolitical factors played an important role. Great Powers and their close allies did not surround Sweden as they did in Switzerland or Austria. An imperial past ending in a catastrophe also played an important role in the emergence of Swedish neutrality.

[1] Reiter, Erich and Gärtner, Heinz, 2001. *Small States and Alliances.* Berlin: Springer. P. 6.

In small countries, neutral status may result from an agreement by neighbouring countries or superpowers and constitute a part of the balance of power. Thus, the neutrality of Luxemburg was the result of an agreement between Europe's Great Powers in the 19th century. Hence, the neutral status of such states as Austria, Switzerland and Finland is governed both by international law and constitutional law.

> However, except for Turkmenistan, almost all other cases of post-Soviet neutrality either failed or were instrumentalised for other political aims, or both

During the Cold war the USA and USSR concluded agreements establishing the neutral status of some states. In 1955 the Moscow Memorandum established the neutral status of Austria[2], which was the result of the USSR's decision to improve relations with the West. Finish neutrality is a similar case. Finland's neutrality does not have roots in international law, and there are no international pledges guaranteeing its neutrality. Finland, like Austria, is a case of enforced neutrality, again by the USSR.

An example of neutrality mutual agreed upon between superpowers is the status of Laos. An agreement proclaiming Laos neutral was signed in July 1962 during the 14-nation conference in Geneva[3]. Nevertheless, the declaration of Laotian neutrality failed to save the country from foreign interference due to confrontation between superpowers and their proxies in that region. Laotian neutrality, introduced by the USA and USSR, malfunctioned because both sides actively exploited this neutrality.

Effective or declared neutrality

Neutrality can be declared in basic state documents. Countries like Austria, Switzerland, The Vatican, Malta, Turkmenistan and Moldova declared neutrality in their constitutions. Meanwhile, in Sweden neutrality is not fixed in the Constitution; it is based on tradition rather than on a document or international treaty.

There are examples in modern history when states officially declared neutral status but did not maintain neutrality in real politics. This happened not only because of actors' insincerity, but also because existing geopolitical circumstances prevented them from maintaining neutrality. Moldova is a case in point. Its Constitution contains a neutrality clause,[4] but nonetheless it is taking part in the Individual Partnership Action Plan with NATO and seeks to draw closer to Euro-Atlantic standards and institutions[5].

Neutrality as a hidden path to independence, international realignment, or switching the foreign policy orientation of a state

After a state achieves independence, neutral status aids in loosening and cutting of patronage relations and dependencies with the former metropolis. Examples of such neutrality can be found in post-colonial or post-imperial systems. After achieving independence, some post-Soviet republics proclaimed neutrality. The most famous example is the neutral status of Turkmenistan. Being a neutral state, Turkmenistan "does not participate in military blocs and alliances, does not

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2 Карнер, Ш., Штельцль-Маркс, Б., и Чубарьян, А. (ред), 2005. Московский меморандум о результатах переговоров между австрийской правительственной делегацией и правительством СССР от 15 апреля 1955 г. Красная Армия в Австрии. Советская оккупация 1945–1955. Документы. Грац-Вена-Мюнхен. С. 824–826

3 No. 6564. Declaration on the Neutrality of Laos. Signed at Geneva on 23 July 1962, 1963. *United Nations Treaty Series,* https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%20456/volume-456-I-6564-English.pdf

4 Constitution of the Republic of Moldova. Article 11. Republic of Moldova – a neutral State, http://www.presedinte.md/eng/titlul1

5 NATO relations with Moldova, 07 April 2016, http://www.nato.int/cps/sk/natohq/topics_49727.htm

allow the creation of military bases on its territory or its use by other countries for military purposes”[6].

However, except for Turkmenistan, almost all other cases of post-Soviet neutrality either failed or were instrumentalised for other political aims, or both. This was the case since the very beginning of the collapse of the Soviet Union when movements initially promoting neutrality later advocated membership of their newly independent states in NATO.

For instance, the Soviet-era Lithuanian political movement Sąjūdis published a political programme calling for a “neutral, independent, and demilitarised Lithuania”[7] as early as 1989. However, after achieving independence it never attempted to establish neutrality. In Ukraine on the other hand, certain elites perhaps sincerely tried to make their country neutral; the last such attempt occurred as recently as 2010, when Ukraine declared its non-alignment status, which was then abolished in 2014. Not being a “small state” but situated between Russia and NATO, Ukraine failed to maintain its neutral status mainly due to domestic reasons – there was a lack of national consensus on the issue.

In sum, it is hardly possible to provide a universal definition of “neutrality”. Giving an example of neutrality in the history of modern world politics, which could be called classical or universal, is equally impossible. All cases of neutrality listed above are sui generis: they have a unique nature and are to be considered results of specific internal and external political circumstances.

3. Elements of neutrality in Belarusian foreign policy

Neutrality primarily concerns the foreign policy of a country. Ever since independence in 1991, Belarusian officials have regularly referred to neutrality as a principle of the nation’s external relations. At the same time, there are very few conceptual texts or research produced on the issue; this is true of both policy and strategy-oriented material and scholarly work. For many years, Belarusian officials and analysts associated with the government explained the notion of neutrality only through meaningless declarations making reference to peace, non-nuclear status and the Belarusian tragedy during the Second World War.

As a result, for many years the concept of neutrality was perceived as merely ornamental, a buzzword in the political rhetoric of the Belarusian government. Given the heavy rhetoric of Russian and Belarusian unity, it could not be taken very seriously. Until the late 2000s, “neutrality” was just one of many ideological toys in the hands of the opportunistic Belarusian leadership.

3.1. Without a Master Plan: Beginnings of Belarusian neutrality in the 1990s and 2000s

The concept of neutrality entered Belarusian political debates at the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union. In July 1990, the national democratic opposition demanded an “explicit declaration” of Belarusian neutrality, yet the proposal failed to find support in parliament. The Declaration on State Sovereignty

[6] B. Shikhmuradov. *Positive Neutrality as the Basis of Foreign Policy of Turkmenistan*, http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/BORIS-O.-SHIKHMURADOV.pdf

[7] Smith, Hedrick, 1991. *The New Russians*. New York: Avon Books. P. 357.

adopted on 27 July 1990 says only that the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic aims to become a neutral and non-nuclear state[8]. This formulation eventually became Article 18 of the Constitution of Belarus, adopted in 1994.

This neutrality, however, remained a purely declarative norm in Belarusian constitutional law throughout the 1990s until roughly the mid-2000s. Very few politicians tried to implement it. Examples of these attempts included resistance from Belarus to joining the Tashkent Treaty on collective security issues concluded between some former Soviet nations in May 1992. This resistance was led by the then Chairman of the Belarusian Supreme Soviet (parliament) Stanislau Shushkevich. He managed to delay signing the Tashkent Treaty by some months.



Stanislau Shushkevich, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Belarus in 1991-1994. He was against Belarus joining the Tashkent Treaty on Collective Security. Photo: Sputnik, Dmitrii Donskoi

After Alyaksandr Lukashenka became president in 1994, Belarus-Russian integration rhetoric dominated the foreign policy of Belarus. For various reasons – both ideological animosities and deficiencies of scholarship and analytics on Belarus at the time – Lukashenka's integration course in the 1990s was misinterpreted. At that point, most opinion makers presented it as a mix of radical rapprochement with Moscow and explicit surrender of any pretence of neutrality.

Both of these assessments oversimplify the situation. Firstly, the baseline of the Belarusian-Russian relationship in the early 1990s was the fact that both Belarus and Russia were part of the Soviet Union. This entailed, inter alia, the absence of clear borders between the republics constituting the Soviet Union in many spheres, and a single foreign and national security policy determined by the Moscow-based Union government.

This situation lasted through the mid-1990s. Belarus and Russia still co-existed as two parts of one disintegrating yet real political, economic, military and cultural body based on the former Soviet Union. Radical rhetoric of disassociation and disentanglement from Russia remained a marginal phenomenon in Belarus without much impact on decision-making.

In light of these circumstances, integration during the 1990s appears very ambiguous, as it did not actually bring Belarus closer to Russia given the reality of the time. Lukashenka renounced the rhetoric of previous Belarusian leadership by choosing a more pro-Russian tone, yet he strengthened the construction of fully-fledged attributes and institutions of Belarusian statehood as separate from Russia (especially compared to the policies of Kebich, for example).

These included national security agencies, the army, the financial system and many other institutions. What's more, another attribute of early state-building included the principle of striving for neutrality and non-nuclear status. Belarus completely withdrew Russian troops from its territory, including the nuclear strategic missile forces. On 27 November 1996, Russia removed all its nuclear arms from Belarus.

This move can be interpreted not only as a move towards neutrality, but also as merely implementing previous agreements that could not be modified without

[8] Александр Курьянович. Принятие Декларации о государственном суверенитете: факты, цифры, цитаты, *Naviny.by*, 27 июля 2009 года, http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2009/07/27/ic_articles_112_163750/

severe international repercussions. However, another one of Minsk's initiatives looks less ambiguous. In 1996, President Lukashenka proposed to establish a nuclear-free zone in Central and Eastern Europe[9]. In 1999, he confirmed that Belarus had no intention of ever acquiring nuclear weapons again. Such statements implied an independent line of thought, as they contradicted Russia's potential plans to move its nukes westward of Russia's borders.


Russian nuclear weapons left Belarus in November 1996. Photo: Public domain

Meanwhile, in 1997 Belarus became an observer, and in 1998 a full member of the Non-Aligned Movement. Minsk was probably more interested in using this Movement to seek new foreign partners, but it nevertheless participated actively in the organisation's work.

At any rate, in those years "the only real foreign partner for Belarus was Russia"[10], because newly independent Belarus, which still lacked developed foreign relations mechanisms and institutions, had to overcome the additional isolation from the West caused by the November 1996 constitutional referendum. Under such circumstances, Minsk could hardly bolster its neutrality except symbolically. Nonetheless, what is important about the nuclear-free zone initiative and membership in the Non-Aligned Movement is that they prove the existence of the idea of neutrality per se in the minds of Belarusian officials.

The Belarusian government's increasing conflict with Putin's Russian leadership in the early 2000s did not come out of the blue, nor was it a consequence of personal conflicts. The clash with Putin was a logical continuation of the gradual establishment of separate state institutions in Belarus and Russia. This process precluded opportunities for informal interactions between state agencies of the two countries and increased the potential for conflicts.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Lukashenka and his government gradually shaped their vision of Belarusian-Russian relations and set out to become Russia's closest ally. In June 2009, Lukashenka voiced this sentiment in an interview with his long-time Russian sympathiser Alexander Prokhanov: "Americans are financing Israel by giving it as many loans as it can absorb and then writing them off. And they completely finance Israel's defence. Let's not literally but conceptually apply their model [to Belarus-Russian relations]. After all, we are more important to you than Israel is to America."[11] However, this idea – to be a kind of "Russia's Israel" was not new by 2009,[12] and had already been discarded by the course of history.


Promoting the "Israeli model" for Belarus-Russian relations: Lukashenka meeting Russian radical right-wing author Alexander Prokhanov. Photo: euroradio.fm

This occurred because of the rise of the new Russian leader, Vladimir Putin, and his shift in foreign policy priorities. He launched a policy of reconstruction of Russia's power through modernisation, aligning

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9 Снапковский, Владимир, 2000. Внешняя политика Республики Беларусь: Первые итоги первого десятилетия, *Белорусский журнал международного права и международных отношений*, №4, http://evolutio.info/content/view/386Itemid=51/

10 Юрий Кожуро. *Беларусь и Движение неприсоединения*, 10 февраля 2004 года, http://nmnby.eu/news/analytics/91.html

11 Так говорит Лукашенко, *Завтра*, №24 (812), 10 июня 2009 года, http://zavtra.ru/content/view/2009-06-1011/

12 That deliberations on "Israeli model" occurred follows from an earlier article by Prokhanov himself which has been published in January 2007. See, Александр Проханов. »Беларусь, ты права!«, *Завтра*, №03 (687), 17 января 2007 года, http://www.zavtra.ru/content/view/2007-01-1711/

itself with the West and giving up residual imperial ambitions. Some of Putin's militant rhetoric concealed the latter component of his policies. After all, it was Putin who closed down Russia's military bases abroad, ceased supporting countries opposing the West and even dismissed numerous questionable projects of integration with Belarus which had helped his predecessor Boris Yeltsin appease voters nostalgic for Soviet times. By the mid-2000s, Minsk had come to terms with Putin.



Picture by Ales Marachkin dedicated to post-election protests in 2006

On the other hand, Belarusian leadership realised that it was playing an increasingly dangerous game with Russia since the early 2000s. The fact that Russia had accepted the expansion of NATO and the EU to the borders of Belarus despite some rhetorical protests, convinced Minsk that times had changed. The Western reaction to the 2006 presidential election also proved to be considerably more severe than in 2001, resulting in a wave of Western sanctions.

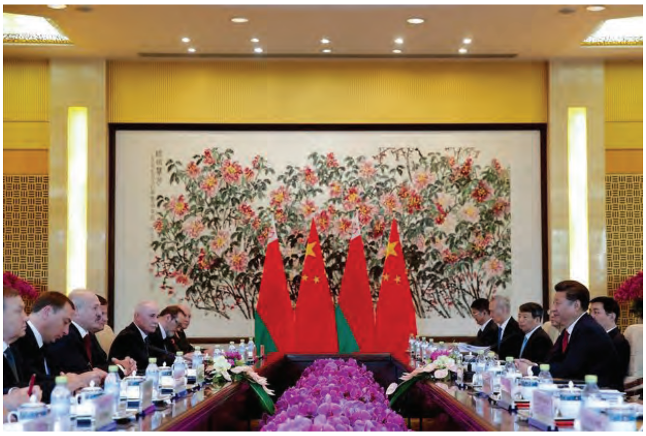
Colour revolutions throughout the post-Soviet space in 2003–2005 reinforced the idea that the Kremlin could not guarantee security or even survival for "its" strongman in Minsk. Belarusian officials watched the pro-Western opposition in fellow post-Soviet countries topple governments that were hesitant to advance towards the West and implement democratic overhauls. The Belarusian establishment realised that its status as an ardent Russian ally increased the probability of generous external support for similar developments in the country for geopolitical reasons. It also realised that there was great potential for revolutionary developments in Belarus due to the suppression of political plurality and the marginalisation of considerable parts of the Belarusian political spectrum.

This realisation was reflected in the regime's reactions to the opposition's preparations for and protests after the March 2006 presidential elections. At this time, Belarusian officials and state-affiliated media widely articulated the issue of foreign support for the opposition, as well as from Ukraine and Georgia which themselves had recently witnessed regime change through 'colour revolutions'.

The circumstances described above, as well as subsequent developments, indicate that 2006–2007 marked the beginning of a new age in Belarusian foreign policy shaped by increasing elements of neutrality. This process began symbolically with Minsk establishing friendly relations with the countries it had accused of supporting the opposition in the 2006 elections on behalf of the West, i.e., Ukraine and Georgia. Both of these countries – ruled by pro-Western elites and having strenuous relations with Russia – very quickly became close partners with Minsk. Concurrently, Minsk renounced its previous policy of favouring Armenia as its prime partner in the region by shifting its priorities to Azerbaijan.

In this way, Minsk became friends with effectively all remaining members of GUUAM (comprising Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova, as Uzbekistan by this time had realigned itself with Russia following the 2005 Andijon events). This was at some point a club of post-Soviet countries opposed to the Kremlin's designs of domination in the post-Soviet space. The Belarusian government realigned itself with GUUAM discretely and on an ad hoc basis. Meanwhile, it did not take an anti-Russian position but nevertheless retained a constant qualified opposition to NATO and Western nations' expansion in the region.

Moreover, the Belarusian government avoided supporting the Kremlin even with regard to the Russian opposition. Minsk not only continued to work with Russian oligarch Boris Berezovsky, but even expanded these apparently secret, yet intensive and extensive, contacts.[13] This partnership mattered politically and shall be qualified as such. One has just to remember the extreme political pressure Moscow exerted on Latvia when it merely welcomed Berezovsky for short-term visits in the mid-2000s. This illustrates what huge risks Minsk took when dealing with the exiled Russian oligarch. Nonetheless, contacts with the GUAM countries and the Russian opposition remained unrecognised as emerging signs of neutrality. For clear reasons, some moves were poorly covered in the media and others were ascribed to "business as usual" Belarusian policies in the post-Soviet region.



Development of relations with China became a strategic priority for the Belarusian government. Photo: Reuters

Minsk's contacts with China have attracted more attention. Since the beginning of his presidency, Lukashenka considered relations with China a priority for Belarusian foreign policy. This prioritisation became even more pronounced after Belarus started to suffer from a huge deficit in trade with China beginning in 2005. Nonetheless, Minsk pressed on building up contacts with Beijing in all spheres: political, military, cultural, etc.[14] It is becoming increasingly evident that Belarusian leadership considers China a counterweight to Russia. This is also becoming evident to Russia. In 2006, Minsk tried without success to join the Chinese-dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, which could become a kind of alternative to more intrusive post-Soviet organisations dominated by Moscow, e.g. CSTO, CIS, EurAsEC[15]. Russia did not hide its opposition to this move[16] and Belarus only became a partner on dialogue in the SCO in 2009, obtaining observer status in 2015.

3.2. The elephant in the room: Belarusian neutrality after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war

This emergence of Belarusian neutrality came to the fore in a much more pronounced way in 2008. During the Russo-Georgian war in August 2008, for the first time in post-Soviet history the Kremlin demonstrated its willingness to openly deploy troops to change post-Soviet borders. This greatly changed the post-Soviet political environment, as nations now faced the real probability not only of economic or political pressure from the Kremlin but also military intervention.

Minsk avoided siding with Moscow during the conflict. After it ended, Belarus steadfastly refused to recognise South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the new de facto states established as a result of Russia's intervention. This would become the first loud public scandal related to the increasing neutrality of Belarusian foreign policy. Nevertheless, in subsequent years Lukashenka would maintain friendly relations with the Georgian president Saakashvili despite the Russian media demonising him. Later on, Minsk would take advantage of this relationship to get closer to the West.

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13 Денис Лавникевич, Ирина Барамидзе, и Жанна Ульянова. Назло своему протеже, *Gazeta.ru*, 29 марта 2013 года, https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2013/03/25_a_5116417.shtml

14 Siarhei Bohdan. China As An Epic Failure Of Belarusian Foreign Policy, *Belarus Digest*, 14 September 2015, http://belarusdigest.com/story/china-epic-failure-belarusian-foreign-policy-23225

15 Cooley, Alexander, 2012. *Great Games, Local Rules. The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia.* New York: Oxford University Press, *passim.*

16 Константин Лантратов, Бек Орозалиев, Михаил Зыгарь, Иван Сафронов, "Шестерка" выходит блоком, *Газета "Коммерсантъ"*, №75, 27 апреля 2006 года, с. 9, http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/670100

These new contacts very soon created additional opportunities for Minsk to distance itself from Russia. After a series of disputes over oil and gas with Moscow, Belarus arranged to purchase oil from Venezuela, then led by president Hugo Chavez. The deliveries started in May 2010 and continued through June 2012. Their routes and mechanisms changed in the course of deliveries. At first, Belarus imported Venezuelan oil through the Baltic States and Ukraine but later arranged an oil swap mechanism involving Belarus, Venezuela and Azerbaijan which entailed importing Azerbaijani oil in exchange for Venezuelan delivered to Belarus via Ukrainian territory.



Belarusian and Georgian leaders have enjoyed friendly relations since the mid-2000s. Photo: comments.ua

This meant that Minsk had effectively made the GUAM concept of establishing an alternative to Russia a reality. It cooperated not only with the key GUAM states of Ukraine and Azerbaijan but also with the Baltic States. For the first time ever, Minsk effectively broke the Russian oil monopoly in its Eastern European neighbourhood. In the final phase of deliveries in early 2012, Belarus was receiving 160,000 tonnes of oil monthly through its arrangement with Venezuela. This covered a small but not negligible portion of its needs (eight-nine per cent of its petroleum needs).

The deal with Venezuela was both bold and an outstanding achievement given the numerous failed Ukrainian attempts to do the same in the early 1990s – mid-2000s through cooperation with Iran and Azerbaijan. These deliveries were immediately derided and criticised by Russian experts and the media, who insisted that the deliveries were "merely motivated by politics"[17].

The import of non-Russian oil to the region forced Moscow to make political concessions in order to stop the deliveries. Vice Prime Minister Uladzimir Syamashka emphasised that were it not for Venezuelan petroleum, Minsk could not have signed agreements on a common market of oil and oil products in 2011.[18]

In April 2010 president Lukashenka granted asylum to ousted Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiyev. What went unnoticed by most Belarusian commentators and the media was that Bakiyev had been toppled after having irked Moscow: forces considered pro-Russian had undertaken the coup against him. The fact that Minsk provided refuge to Bakiyev is important because it shows Belarusian neutrality gaining a new dimension –as a refuge for the politically persecuted. What's more, it is a clear example of Minsk practicing neutrality even when it does not immediately or evidently profit (except possibly by helping president Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan in expectation of reciprocal assistance from him). This debunks the notion of Belarusian opportunism. In addition, this gesture – while irritating Moscow – did nothing to help Belarusian relations with the West. The latter aspect proves that the decision was not just another of Lukashenka's manoeuvres between Russia and the West but rather an expression of the principles of neutrality of Belarusian foreign policy.

Emerging Belarusian neutrality became even more pronounced after the domestic political confrontation in Ukraine triggered the Russian annexation of

[17] Эксперт: пастаўкі нафты з Венесуэлы маюць толькі палітычны сэнс, *Еўрарадыё*, 18 ліпеня 2010 года, http://euroradio.fm/ekspert-pastauki-nafty-z-venesuely-mayuc-tolki-palitychny-sens

[18] Сямашка: Калі б не было паставак нафты з Венесуэлы, магчыма, не было б пагадненняў аб адзіным з Расіяй і Казахстанам нафтавым рынку, *Белапан*, 22 чэрвеня 2012 года, http://by.belapan.by/archive/2012/06/22/by_media_pp_v7/

Crimea and the armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Belarus refused to recognise Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, continued intensive economic cooperation with Ukraine and even supplied it with significant volumes of military and dual-use equipment[19]. Given the expected reaction from the Kremlin, Minsk made a bold move. Furthermore, by hosting an international summit on the conflict in Eastern Ukraine it continued to formalise its neutral status.



Toppled Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiev found a new home in Belarus. Photo: tut.by

The Belarusian position on Crimea and the conflict in Eastern Ukraine made Belarus-Russian relations even tenser. However, Minsk did not hesitate to continue with its policies, and has for instance kept cooperating with Turkey after Turkish-Russian relations soured in November 2015 in connection with the war in Syria. As Russia and Turkey broke off their political, economic and cultural relations and increased their confrontation through proxies in Syria, Minsk demonstratively kept working with Ankara, and president Lukashenka even went to Istanbul to attend a summit of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in April 2016.

To identify components of neutrality, this paper examined Belarusian relations with its most important partner, Russia. Certainly, neutrality cannot be reduced just to relations with this mighty neighbour. Some other examples of Belarusian foreign policy reveal even more striking cases of Belarusian neutrality.[20] These include numerous precedents in which Minsk maintained good relations with countries known to be enemies of one another. The following table lists some of them.

Table one. Examples of Belarus' neutral foreign policy with regards to the countries hostile to each other

Partner countries of Belarus known to be hostile to each other	Time span
Iraq vs. Iran and Syria	Late 1990s – early 2000s
Israel vs. Iran, Syria	1990s – 2010s
Azerbaijan vs. Armenia	Late 2000s – mid-2010
Arab monarchies (Qatar, UAE etc.) vs. radical Middle Eastern regimes (Libya, Iran, Syria)	1990s – early 2010s

Neutrality here does not mean absolute even-handedness. Minsk practiced flexible partnership hinging on Belarus's needs and opportunities at any given time with regards to all bilateral relations.

This flexibility and refusal to support any one specific party in a conflict cannot be dismissed as mere opportunism, as such a political line regularly turned out to be a difficult policy and sometimes came at a price. Time and again Belarus dealt with the fallout of these policies. For instance, the concurrent Belarusian cooperation with Iran and Israel led to criticisms from Tel-Aviv and response from Tehran to Israeli criticism. This became widely publicised during the June 2009 visit of Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman[21].

19 Siarhei Bohdan. Belarus Helps Ukraine with Military Equipment, *Belarus Digest*, 10 April 2015 http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-helps-ukraine-military-equipment-22274

20 For more detailed discussion of such examples, please see Siarhei Bohdan, Belarusian Foreign Policy: Between Tehran and Tel-Aviv, *Belarus Digest*, 09 August 2013, http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarusian-foreign-policy-between-tehran-and-tel-aviv-15032

21 Белорусско-иранские отношения не являются угрозой для других стран, уверяет иранский посол, *Naviny.by*, 04 июня 2009 года, http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2009/06/04/ic_news_112_312417/

3.3. Dynamics: The Rise of Belarusian neutrality

In order to assess the place of neutrality in Belarusian external relations, major decisions and developments in Belarusian foreign policy of the recent decade which can be described as neutral shall be identified. These decisions and developments **will then be characterised** with regard to their importance for the three major parties involved: Belarus, Russia and the West. Such analysis provides a brief scheme for the development of neutrality elements in Belarusian foreign policy. For the purposes of this study, the importance of an issue for a specific party means how much this issue per se matters for this party itself.

Thus, the conflict in Eastern Ukraine is an important issue for Belarus because it creates a direct threat to its welfare and security. Minsk can be expected to respond to the conflict primarily on the basis of its immediate interests (trade, regional stability, border security, prevention of extremism etc.). In this case, the Belarusian government can act on the issue despite possible backlash from third party countries.

On the other hand, Minsk's refusal in 2015–2016 to give up contacts with Turkey and its continuing cooperation with Ankara meant little for Minsk, unlike for Moscow: no immediate Belarusian national interests were concerned. The fact that Minsk refused to support Russia on a matter of little immediate importance for itself but of significant immediate importance for Russia shows that it is taking principled steps towards a more balanced and neutral position.

Table two. Major elements of neutrality in Belarusian foreign policy in 2006–2016

Event	Importance for Belarus	Importance for Russia	Importance for the West
Rapprochement with Ukraine since 2006	high	low	low
Rapprochement with Georgia since 2006	low	low	low
Rapprochement with the SCO since 2006, and increasing affiliation with it since 2009	middle	middle to high (since the early 2010s)	low
Position Regarding the 2008 Georgia War	low	high	high
Non-recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Belarus since 2008	low	high	high
Cooperation with the Russian opposition in the late 2000s (Berezovski)	high	high	low
Alternative oil supplies in 2010–2012	high	high	low
Refuge for Bakiev after 2010	low	low	low
Non-recognition of Crimea annexation since 2014	mediate	high	high
Refusal to side with Russia in Eastern Ukraine conflict since 2014	high	high	high
Refusal to side with Russia in its conflict with Turkey since 2015	low	high	low

As follows from Table two, the Belarusian government has pursued its own policies starkly differing from Russian ones on a range of major issues related to international politics and/or bilateral relations with third countries. Since 2008 Minsk has been willing to regularly challenge Moscow on foreign policy issues of high importance to Russia. Some of these issues were not of high importance for

the West and therefore cannot be interpreted as Minsk playing Russia and the West against each other.

In most of these cases Minsk not only avoided siding with Russia but also refused to support its opponent. In other words, Belarus did not change sides or switch loyalties. Instead, it strived to stay neutral and find a middle way. The situations surrounding Eastern Ukraine and Crimea are two major cases in point.

Since 2008 Minsk has been willing to regularly challenge Moscow on foreign policy issues of high importance to Russia

Although the question of extent, mechanisms and dynamics of Belarusian neutrality has yet to be investigated in a larger study, even this brief analysis indicates a) the constant presence of major elements of neutrality in Belarusian foreign policy in 2006–2016; b) their emergence starting in 2006–2007, strengthening in 2008 and major rise after 2013; c) the Belarusian government's proclivity to enhance those elements which prepare the ground for full-fledged and formalised neutrality.

3.4. Neutrality as a concept and practice

The Belarusian opposition often claims that Belarusian neutrality is not real; "does Belarus have genuine neutrality," asks political analyst Yanov Poleski, implying a negative answer[22]. Others argue that neutrality for Belarus is impossible[23].

This criticism is based on a normative approach to the issue of neutrality and involves comparing Belarus with an ideal model. Political activist Yauhien Anishchanka argues in the daily Narodnaya Volya in favour of proclaiming a "constitutional regime of constant neutrality" which according to him "is already being applied in world practice."[24] An assistant to the 2015 presidential candidate Tatyana Karatkevich, Andrey Dzmitryeu, argues for another theoretical concept – "military neutrality" – and even sets a timespan for its achievement in ten years. He resolves the problem of forcing Russia to recognise Belarusian neutrality simply. He asserts that in ten years' time the situation will have changed and Russia will then agree to a new neutral Belarus, to "leave it alone [otpustit]"[25]. These last words, along with other details in the article reveal that he does not see the need to find an arrangement with Russia in order to achieve neutrality.

In a word, there are few oppositional politicians and activists who would accept the current government's approach based on constructing neutrality on an ad hoc basis. Most express their disappointment with the current status of Belarusian neutrality, far from the model set by other neutral states considered paragons of neutrality like Sweden, Switzerland or Finland.

The Belarusian government also failed to articulate its vision of neutrality in the form of a sophisticated concept. This is probably due to several factors: Belarus lacks the intellectual capacities, and pronouncing such a concept too openly might render it useless or even be harmful by establishing conceptual limits to Belarus's foreign policy manoeuvres. For years, Minsk has built its neutrality on an ad hoc basis, responding to the challenges it faces. Given the sensitive

[22] Янов Полесский. Есть ли у Беларуси подлинный нейтралитет, *"Наше мнение"*, 14 декабря 2015 года, http://thinktanks.by/publication/2015/12/14/est-li-u-belarusi-podlinnyy-neytralitet.html

[23] Таццяна Шапуцька. Нейтралітэт па-беларуску: не ваюем, але ў вайсковыя арганізацыі ўваходзім, *Ідэя*, 22 Снежня 2015 года, https://ideaby.org/military-organisations/

[24] Евгений Анищенко. Беларуси нужен конституционный режим постоянного нейтралитета, *Народная Воля*, 9 студзеня 2013 года, http://tinyurl.com/hyrgz7l

[25] Андрэй Дзмітрыеў: Дасягненне нейтралітэту павінна стаць галоўнай мэтай замежнай палітыкі Беларусі, *Наша Ніва*, 08 мая 2016 года, http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=169875

nature of its relations with Moscow, Belarusian leadership may prefer to avoid too much clarity about its foreign policy and national security choices.

The roots of Belarusian neutrality are, therefore, not ideological. By pursuing neutrality, Minsk is mostly acting according to pragmatic needs of national survival. It was difficult external conditions that made the Belarusian government begin to implement a neglected constitutional tenet.



In September 2015 presidential candidate Tatsyana Karatkevich demanded "military neutrality" for Belarus. Photo: Belapan.com

Instead of using the clear-cut term "neutrality," which has more concrete connotations, Minsk put forth satisfactorily opaque home-made concepts containing elements of neutrality. This lack of determination has granted the Belarusian government more space for political manoeuvring and allowed it to avoid the ire of Moscow. The official discourse of Belarusian leadership contains two important concepts of this kind – "multidirectionality" [shmatvektarnast'/ mnogovektornost'] and "integration of integrations" [intehracyya intehratsyy/ integratsiya integratsiy].[26]

As early as January 1995, president Lukashenka emphasised the necessity for the Belarusian state to achieve a balance between "Eastern and Western interests". In October 1996, Lukashenka declared this principle of multidirectionality to be a fundamental principle of Belarusian foreign policy. Indeed, the government has since referred constantly to multidirectionality in order to interpret the country's foreign policy. Over time, the concept developed from a mere diversification of foreign relations towards a more neutrality-like notion. In April 2011, Lukashenka defined multidirectionality as the strategy of "equal proximity [ravnaya priblizhennost']" to the East and West.[27]

Soon after that, in October 2011, he wrote an article proposing a broader concept with a similar meaning: "integration of integrations.[28]" The text argued for overcoming the opposition between the Eurasian Economic Union and the European Union as well as opening up to other countries and integration blocks in the East. For Belarus, this meant effectively overcoming its exclusive membership to the pro-Russian block and joining different integration projects in the East and West.

Although such conceptual constructions also lack a sophisticated intellectual basis, they cannot simply be dismissed. In fact, they seem to be a continuation of the frequent Soviet practice of articulating political concepts with only minimal argumentation and ambiguous formulations. What is important for understanding Lukashenka's proclamations is their core idea: to avoid the ultimatum of siding with one party, maintaining a certain distance from the countries or blocks that oppose each other.

[26] Шадурский, Виктор, 2010. Реализация принципа многовекторности в белорусской внешней политике, *Труды факультета международных отношений: научный сборник*. Вып. I. Минск: БГУ. С. 47–51.

[27] Каваленя, А.А. (рэд.), 2012. *Гісторыя беларускай дзяржаўнасці ў канцы XVIII – пачатку XXI ст.* Мінск: Беларуская навука. С. 562–565.

[28] Александр Лукашенко. О судьбах нашей интеграции, *Известия*, 17 октября 2011 года, http://izvestia.ru/news/504081

4. Elements of neutrality in Belarusian national security policy

National security policy expectedly presents a more mixed picture as far as neutrality is concerned. Belarus still participates in numerous military agreements with Russia and is a member of the CSTO. Minsk hosts two Russian technical military facilities and has in recent years negotiated with Moscow on possible hosting a Russian air base.

In other words, on the surface few signs of neutrality are apparent. But as in many other cases, the prevailing opinion is the result of many politically biased analyses. Analysts traditionally consider any move by Minsk to be either pro-Russian or anti-Russian. In addition, discussion in the media lacks depth: when reporting on the issue of the airbase, no Belarusian media analysed changes in the military balance that provide context for negotiations on the base. A series of facts casts doubt on the mainstream opinion that Belarusian national security policy lacks signs of neutrality.

4.1. Membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation

Officially, Belarus remains a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) dominated by Russia. However, as is the case with almost all other post-Soviet international organisations and initiatives, status and actual function (or rather dysfunction) of this organisation cast doubt on its capability to coordinate and, hence, influence its members' policies.

The CSTO has so far failed not only to persuade its members to deploy their forces to any conflict zone, but even to support each other in appropriate situations. This became increasingly conspicuous as CSTO members failed to support Russia even rhetorically in its conflicts with Ukraine and Turkey, and did not display solidarity with Armenia as hostilities over Nagorno-Karabakh renewed in April 2016.[29] Neither of these cases was minor, but instead involved a series of events in which Minsk adamantly refused to support Moscow and Yerevan.

The CSTO has so far failed not only to persuade its members to deploy their forces to any conflict zone, but even to support each other in appropriate situations

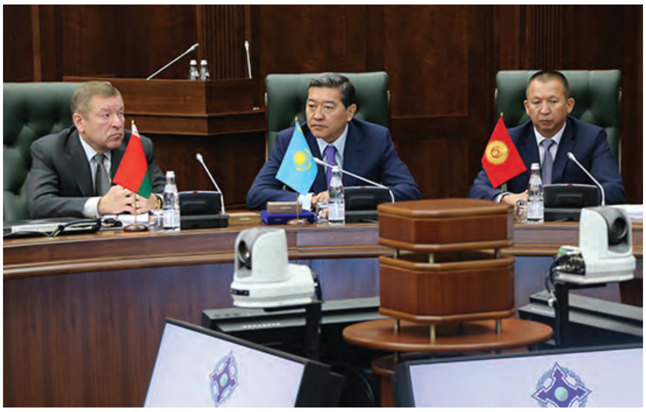
During the conflict between Russia and Turkey, which started in November 2015, representatives of the CSTO member states initially refused to issue a statement supporting Moscow in its confrontation with Ankara. Later, after an Armenian delegate claimed that the CSTO member nations had expressed support for the Kremlin, the defence ministries of Belarus and Kazakhstan dismissed it.[30]

Another similar chain of events illustrating the weakness of the CSTO occurred in the spring of 2016. First, on 2 April 2016, the Belarusian foreign ministry responded to the beginning of a new round of hostilities in Karabakh with a statement underlining the inviolability of international borders and territorial

[29] Иван Зацарин. Школа боевых искусств для Евразии: к 22-летию Договора о коллективной безопасности, *История России*, 20 апреля 2016 года, http://histrf.ru/lyuboznatelnim/nations-of-russia/nations-of-russia-article/shkola-boievykh-iskusstv-dlia-ievrazii-k-22-lietiiu-doghovora-o-kolliektivnoibiezopasnosti

[30] Павел Юринцев, Филипп Прокудин. Кто уполномочен заявить: почему союзники Москвы решительно отмежевались от конфликта с Турцией, *Лента*, 15 декабря 2015 года, https://lenta.ru/articles/2015/12/15/odkb/

integrity. This irritated Armenia because it meant supporting Azerbaijan, which demands recovery of all the territories that belonged to Soviet Azerbaijan. Despite a harsh reaction from Yerevan, on 4 April Minsk issued a second statement implying that Belarusian troops would not be sent to participate in foreign conflicts.[31] This dealt a blow to the structure of the CSTO, which Yerevan had hoped to involve in its conflict with Azerbaijan.



Belarusian defence minister Yury Zhadobin attends a CSTO Ministerial Council Meeting in Moscow in June 2014. Photo: Embassy of Belarus in Moscow

By adopting a new national military doctrine in April 2016, Minsk sent a clear message that Belarusian troops would not be participating in operations of the CSTO. The norm of not sending Belarusian troops to conflict zones abroad has existed in Belarusian legislation since 1991 and the new doctrine reiterates it.

The changes in the doctrine undermined the coherence of the CSTO and even caused protests from fellow members of the organisation. On 15 April 2016 deputy foreign minister of Armenia Shavarsh Kocharyan publicly announced that the new Belarusian military doctrine was causing concern for Armenia as a CSTO member.

Many analysts and politicians recognize that the CSTO matters little for its members. Even Belarusian president Lukashenka, at a meeting with CSTO secretary general Nikolai Bordyuzha in 2015, talked about the danger of the organisation becoming "one more phantom [like other post-Soviet structures]. Belarusian political analyst Andrei Fyodarau argues: "Obviously, it is too early to call the CSTO a truly operational military-political organisation."[32]

4.2. Russian military presence

At the moment Russia has two military sites in Belarus. Moscow is careful to emphasize that these are not "bases," but just "obyekty," i.e., facilities. The north-western town of Vileika has hosted the 43rd Communications Centre of the Russian Navy since 1964, where 350 naval commissioned and warrant officers reportedly serve. An early warning radar of the Russian Aerospace Forces has functioned since 2002 in the southern town of Hantsavichy; around 2,000 Russian personnel are stationed at the site.

The presence of Russian troops in Belarus remains lower than in other countries of the former Soviet Union such as Tajikistan, Armenia, or Ukrainian Crimea before 2014. Both above mentioned military sites were established by a treaty signed between Belarus and Russian in January 1995 – before Lukashenka had time to consolidate his rule.[33]

In this context, the possible Russian airbase discussed in 2013–2015 was a relatively novel idea. However, these discussions were never more than a

[31] Siarhei Bohdan. Belarus-Turkey Rapprochement: Minsk Refuses to Fight for Kremlin and Its Allies, *Belarus Digest*, 20 April 2016, http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-turkey-rapprochement-minskrefuses-fight-kremlin-and-its-allies-25424

[32] Андрей Федоров. Преодолеет ли ОДКБ стадию фантома? *Naviny.by*, 19 апреля 2015 года, http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2015/04/19/ic_articles_112_188707/

[33] Siarhei Bohdan. Belarus Wants New Russian Fighter Jets but Without Russian Pilots, *Belarus Digest*, 03 May 2013, http://belarusdigest.com/story/belarus-wants-new-russian-fighter-jets-without-russianpilots-13897



Russian military facility in Vileyka. Photo: Public domain

bargaining chip: Belarus's most important resource is its geographical location between Russia and the EU. Thus, by contemplating the prospect of inviting more Russian troops into the country, the Belarusian leader could have had more up his sleeve than simply obtaining more Russian loans or subsidies. In particular, he could use it to play other geopolitical games.

While the existing Russian military facilities certainly limit Belarusian neutrality, they are remnants of an older epoch which preceded independent Belarus. Their legal status was consolidated at a time when Belarusian foreign policy still had no clear shape. For this reason, neither the establishment of these facilities nor their legal formalisation actually contradict the concept of Belarusian neutrality: these sites are relics of a different geopolitical context.

What's more, the practice of neutrality in global politics proves that even a neutral country can pursue some military cooperation with another nation without losing its neutrality status in international politics. Turkmenistan is a case in point: in the 2000s and 2010s it silently cooperated with the US by supporting American operations in Afghanistan, providing some access rights to the US Air Force.

4.3. The Russian airbase in Belarus

Dmitry Medvedev claimed that the idea of establishing an airbase in Belarus emerged in 2009. "Back then we signed the documents on the joint protection of the borders of Belarus and Russia and the joint air defence system. In fact, the agreement [on the airbase] implements those agreements."[34]

However, those documents say nothing specific about a permanent Russian base in Belarus. According to known facts, Moscow decided to enhance its military presence in Belarus only in early 2013. In April 2013, it publicly announced plans to station its own air force in the country.



Russian military facility in Hantsavichy. Photo: Mil.ru

At that point, details of official talks and expert comments indicated that the reason for such plans was the weakened Belarusian air force. Indeed, by that time Moscow had doubts about Minsk's ability to protect the joint air border as agreed. Minsk, which had inherited an impressive fleet of Soviet state-of-the-art military aircraft, failed to obtain newer planes after independence.

The situation worsened in the 2010s due to financial constraints, and Minsk was left with largely obsolete Soviet aircraft. By that time Minsk had no functioning heavy Sukhoi Su-27 fighter jets at all. Earlier, in the mid-2000s, the Belarusian government had halted the modernisation programme of MiG-29 light fighter jets for ten years due to a lack of funds. This programme was relaunched only in late 2013 after Minsk realised that Russia would not give it newer aircraft.

[34] Путин поручил Минобороны подписать соглашение об авиабазе в Белоруссии, *Интерфакс*, 19 сентября 2015 года, http://www.interfax.ru/russia/467833

Given Belarus's inadequate air force, Russia wanted to send its own fighter jets to Belarus. In terms of the regional military balance this meant a return to the situation a decade ago. At that point, Minsk still had a regiment of Sukhoi heavy fighter jets, but Russia wanted to send its own regiment (of the same modernised Sukhoi airplanes) to Belarus[35].

After lengthy negotiations Minsk managed first to change the geographical location of the base, moving it as far away as possible from NATO's borders. It then made Russia reduce the amount of aircraft it planned to deploy. Finally, Belarusian leadership in autumn 2015 refused to accept the Russian airbase under any pretext.



Belarusian defence minister Andrei Raukou called the issue of a possible Russian airbase in Belarus "political." Photo: tut.by

This was expected in part because of the danger involved in establishing a Russian military base in Belarus given the confrontation between Russia and NATO. By that time, Minsk had also managed to strengthen its air force by repairing its own fighter jets and could live up to its obligations in the joint air defence system with Russia.

It is true that Minsk had to exercise extreme caution in distancing itself from Moscow in the military sphere due to the sensitivity of the issues involved. Russia has vital security interests in Belarus, especially given the close proximity of Belarus to the core Russian regions and the capital Moscow. The Belarusian army is also dependent on Russia in many technical, doctrinal, historical and even human respects, so that any radical moves to change the situation can have extreme consequences. It comes as no surprise that Minsk has been more cautious in complementing changes in its foreign policy towards neutrality with appropriate adjustments to its national security policy.

4.4. Diversification in the military sphere and defence industries

As a small country struggling with numerous economic problems, Belarus has to cooperate with other states to maintain even minimal defence capacities. Earlier, such cooperation occurred almost exclusively with Russia. Since the early 2010s, however, the national army and defence industry have achieved a certain degree of diversification in their supplies and technological cooperation. While only fragmentary information exists on this matter, Belarus is clearly fostering significant cooperation in military and military industrial spheres with China, and military industrial cooperation with Ukraine (despite its conflict with Russia), Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Pakistan and some other countries.

Cooperation with Ukraine and China play a particularly important role for Belarus. Collaboration with Ukraine since the beginning of the conflict between Kyiv and Moscow has continued and even intensified[36]. The Belarusian government, and especially defence industries, are exploring new spheres of

[35] В Барановичах до конца 2014 года развернут полк российских истребителей, *Naviny.by*, 17 марта 2014 года, http://naviny.by/rubrics/politic/2014/03/17/ic_news_112_433531

[36] Игорь Тышкевич. Беларуский военторг в Украине: как Минск помогает Киеву отстроить мощную армию, *Хвиля*, 12 декабря 2015 года, http://hvylya.net/analytics/geopolitics/belaruskiy-voentorg-vukraine-kak-minsk-pomogaet-kievu-otstroit-moshhnuyu-armiyu.html

cooperation. Already in April 2014, while visiting the Baranavichy 558th Aviation Repairs Works, Lukashenka stated: “Let’s try to make deals with the Ukrainians and work together so that Ukraine’s intellectual and engineering centres and designers do not perish.”



Palanez MLRS. Photo: vsr.mil.by

In late September 2014, a delegation from the Belarusian military industrial complex visited several Ukrainian military enterprises. They displayed particular interest in factories and design organisations in Kyiv, Lviv, Dnipropetrovsk and Chernyhiv which dealt with missiles and missile components (i.e. air defence, surface-to-surface and cruise missiles). There were rumours of Ukrainian involvement in developing Palanez MLRS, as well as preparations for the production of missiles for SAM systems in Belarus. According to some experts, Belarus might have started financing the development of the tactical ballistic missile system Hrim by the Ukrainian Yuzhnoye State Design Office in 2013 or 2014.[37]

Cooperation with China is another example of the Belarusian military and defence industries diversifying their links. After the Kremlin refused to give Belarus state-of-the-art arms such as the Iskander short-range ballistic missile system in the late 2000s and early 2010s, Minsk began cooperating with China in 2009 on designing new weapons. In 2012–2013, Minsk reportedly signed two agreements with China on designing two major arms system: a multiple launch rocket system (MLRS) and surface-to-air missile system. The former has already borne fruit, as Minsk in 2015 demonstrated its Palanez MLRS.



2015 Joint Belarusian-Chinese military drills in Brest province. Photo: vsr.mil.by

On 15 January 2016, the Belarusian-Chinese satellite Belintersat-1 was launched from the Chinese Xichang Space Centre. The Belarusian Military Industrial Committee was in charge of the project from the Belarusian side, while Great Wall Industrial Corporation carried out the project from the Chinese side. The launch became another in a series of cooperation projects with China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC), which owns Great Wall Corporation. The establishment of a production line to manufactures the rockets for Palanez also apparently took place with the assistance of another company belonging to CASC: Sichuan Space Industry Corporation. This was the first time that Minsk resorted to Chinese services to launch a satellite. Belarus had previously implemented its space projects with Russian help.

In addition, Minsk conducts joint military exercises with China. In 2011–2015, three such exercises were held on both Chinese and Belarusian territory.

[37] Who’s the Secret Buyer of Ukraine’s ‘Grom’ Tactical Ballistic Missile System? *Sputnik News*, 07 August 2016, http://sputniknews.com/military/20160807/1044029566/grom-ballistic-missile-system-analysis.html

5. Possible future for the development of Belarusian neutrality

Belarus has effectively begun to implement the neutrality clause of its Constitution. This does not mean that other states will automatically recognize this neutrality, although such recognition to a large degree determines the chances of Belarusian neutrality's success. In the eyes of many Russian politicians, Belarus can either take Moscow's side on every issue or be regarded as being against it. For the Kremlin, Belarus cannot simply be an ally with its own position on some issues, even if this is a neutral position which does not oppose Russia. Still more problematic for Russia is Belarusian neutrality in the realms of foreign policy and defence.

This is no wonder, given the importance of Belarus for Russian security and Russia's suspicions that neutrality is only a cover for drifting toward the West. The history of post-Soviet nations presents several examples of the instrumentalisation of neutrality for such drifting – both real and interpreted by the Kremlin as such (see the first part of the paper).

The lack of acceptance for more neutral Belarusian positions seems to be universal in Moscow. For instance, in October 2015, Maxim Yusin wrote in the liberal Kommersant daily that Lukashenka was feeling more confident than ever before in his negotiations with Moscow. Minsk pursues a multidirectional foreign policy, and foreign powers strive for influence over Belarus. According to Yusin, this policy of balancing between Russia and the West is similar to that of Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych before his toppling in 2014. He ends by implying that the same fate could await the Belarusian leader as well.[38]

More right-wing Russian media criticise Belarusian neutrality in even harsher terms. For instance, after Belarus refused to support Russia in its conflict with Turkey, Eurasia Daily commented in December 2015 that "Belarusian neutrality is hypocrisy in the face of spilled blood [of people in Ukraine and fallen Russian soldiers in Syria]."[39] The Kremlin reacted even more openly. Russian political commentator Evgeni Satanovski wrote an article in Eurasia Daily accusing Minsk of secretly playing against Russian policy in Syria. He included Belarus in the "Alliance of Backstabbing Nations", together with traditional opponents of Moscow like Qatar, the UAE and Turkey.[40] Satanovski, who has moved away from analysing only Middle Eastern affairs in favour of politics in general, acts as a mouthpiece for at least a part of the Russian regime.

In the eyes of many Russian politicians, Belarus can either take Moscow's side on every issue or be regarded as being against it

Unfortunately, Belarusian neutrality might not be truly accepted or even recognised as such by its other partners, including in the West. The reaction of German politicians and experts to emerging elements of neutrality in Belarusian policy is a case in point.

In October 2015 Andrei Dynko commented that German politicians, experts and officials unanimously emphasise that they do not trust Lukashenka in his foreign political initiatives [which were by then shaped by neutrality elements] and believe

38 Максим Юсин. В торге с Москвой Лукашенко чувствует себя как никогда уверенно, *Коммерсантъ FM*, 15 октября 2015 года, http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2832493

39 Павел Юринцев. «Нейтралитет» Белоруссии – лицемерие на крови, *Eurasia Daily*, 9 декабря 2015 года, https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2015/12/09/neytralitet-belorussii-licemerie-na-krovi

40 Евгений Сатановский. Содружество ударов в спину, *Военно-промышленный курьер*, № 46 (612), 2 декабря 2015 года, http://vpk-news.ru/articles/28275

that the Kremlin is capable of controlling Belarus, including regarding its plans for an airbase.[41] Similar scepticism has been articulated by Wolfgang Sender, an expert at Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung. At a conference in May 2016, he supported Minsk's desire for a multidirectional policy only to immediately express his firm belief that "sooner or later Belarus will face a situation in which it will be forced to take this or that side."[42]

Officials in neighbouring countries frequently agree. On 8 July 2016 Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevičius announced: "Objectively, Belarus shall be perceived as a single entity [odno tseloe] with Russia. Belarus has its own position on some issues yet our perception has not changed."[43]

Minsk has already succeeded in distancing itself from the risky endeavours of Russia and other countries in international politics by referring to international law

Against all the odds, neutrality has become a cause that a significant contingent of Belarusian elites, as well as those currently in control of the state, is willing to fight for. Lukashenka and other Belarusian officials are demonstrating that Belarus refuses to follow those of Putin's policies which have led to Russia's political and military confrontation with numerous countries. In practical terms, it does not matter whether they are resisting these policies on moral or pragmatic grounds.

Belarusian leadership apparently believes that such Kremlin policies are unsound and doomed. Lukashenka knowingly mocked Russia's 'historic' claims to Crimea, suggesting that it might mean the transfer of most of Eurasia, including Russia, to Mongol administration, since historically Mongols owned these lands.[44]

According to Belarusian political commentator Valer Karbalevich, after Russia fell out with Turkey last November: "Russia, which had been a source of support [for the Belarusian government], has turned into a source of problems. It is time to swim away from [Putin's] Titanic."[45]

That would be a difficult task given the irreplaceable role played by Russia in the Belarusian economy. Nevertheless, it is possible. Minsk has already succeeded in distancing itself from the risky endeavours of Russia and other countries in international politics by referring to international law. In this way, Belarus has deemed a variety of different political projects illegitimate, some of which are backed by Russia. These include the secession of Kosovo, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, Crimea (although with reservations), and Karabakh.

It has also consistently distanced itself from major Russian foreign policy moves: not only in faraway places like the Middle East, but also in Eastern Europe, where Minsk struggles to maintain a good relationship with Ukraine and repair relations with the West.

At the moment, Belarusian neutrality is still very limited, and the Kremlin maintains significant influence in the country. But if Minsk succeeds in cautiously

[41] Андрэй Дынько. З пачутага ў Берліне: «Мы Лукашэнку не давяраем», а авіябазу лічаць вырашанай справай, *Наша Ніва*, 17 кастрычніка 2015 года, http://nn.by/?c=ar&i=158272

[42] Павлюк Быковский. Минский диалог: кому выгодна белорусская многовекторность, *Deutsche Welle*, 06 мая 2016 года, http://tinyurl.com/jyxvb94

[43] Глава МИД Литвы: НАТО не считает Беларусь угрозой, но видит ее как одно целое с Россией, *TUT.BY*, 8 июля 2016 года, http://news.tut.by/politics/503736.html

[44] Лукашенко: Если Крым – это Россия, то Россия – это Монголия, *День*, 9 октября 2014 года, http://day.kyiv.ua/ru/news/091014-lukashenko-esli-krym-eto-rossiya-rossiya-eto-mongoliya

[45] Валер Карбалевіч. Расея без саюзьнікаў, *Радыё Свабода*, 07 жніўня 2014 года, http://www.svaboda.org/a/26518099.html

distancing itself from Putin's policies and changing its political economy through diversification and by developing an appropriate framework of relations with Russia and the West, it could succeed in becoming neutral.

After WWII, Finland succeeded in building neutrality in a comparable context of tight Soviet control. Helsinki painstakingly avoided confrontation with Moscow, and accepted legitimate Soviet interests while building its own country and gradually developing more independent and neutral policy. Belarus could do the same.

In recent years, Minsk has been moving in this direction. For example, it struggled to find a middle way between Russia and its numerous opponents in the West, the former Soviet Union, and the Middle East. It also recognised those Russian vital interests which the Belarusian government considers legitimate: for example, it continues to participate in the Single air defence system.

There is no doubt that in order to implement some model of neutrality, the Belarusian government has yet to fulfil several challenging tasks. First of all, it requires recognition for Belarusian neutrality from its foreign partners, especially Russia. To do that, Minsk needs to prove that neutrality does not entail a pro-Western or anti-Russian stance.

Belarusian neutrality ought to be acceptable to Moscow. It means self-restraint for Belarusian foreign and national security policy, as well as self-restraint in domestic political debates. Such a policy could succeed and be accepted by Russia and other countries only if supported by a very wide consensus in Belarusian society.

For the majority of the population, such policies could prove popular. Unfortunately, opinion surveys usually create a false dichotomy by either asking people to choose between only Russia (Eurasian integration) and the West (Europe, EU, NATO) or posing the question in a form that distorts the numbers of people who would support neutrality. Yet even without wider public discussion of neutrality, a rare public opinion survey which in autumn 2014 had explicitly asked the people about neutrality showed that about 20 per cent of Belarusians chose neutrality as the best model of Belarusian foreign policy orientation, while ten per cent preferred joining the EU, and 30 per cent supported membership in the Eurasian Economic Union[46]. Despite the odd formulation of the question, the numbers show that neutrality is a viable option as far as public support is concerned. Remarkably, it was the president's aide Kiryl Rudy who announced the results of this survey; this could indicate that the Belarusian government is seriously considering neutrality.

> the current Belarusian government has no other choice but to persuade broader segments of the Belarusian opposition about the necessity of supporting neutrality

However, most of the opposition, the media independent of the Belarusian government, and the related analytical community would not currently subscribe to neutrality. They would be especially wary of a model of neutrality involving close interaction with Russia (as in the Finnish case after WWII).

This problem is a general one: all other foreign policy and national security options except joining NATO and the EU have been discarded in the region over the last two decades, and Minsk would have a difficult time overcoming this mind-set. Nevertheless, the current Belarusian government has no other

[46] Памочнік Лукашэнкі: Страта беларускай мовы – адна з галоўных пагроз, *Еўрарадыё*, 17 кастрычніка 2014 года, http://euroradio.fm/pamochnik-lukashenki-strata-belaruskay-movy-adna-z-galounyh-pagroz

choice but to persuade broader segments of the Belarusian opposition about the necessity of supporting neutrality. It cannot accomplish this until the political regime becomes more pluralist and the constructive opposition has a stake in governance.

This broad public support for neutrality is necessary, inter alia, to convince Russia that Belarusian neutrality is the real will of all mainstream political forces in Belarus. Otherwise, there is an extremely high risk – if not certainty – that Russia would perceive Belarusian neutrality as a concept supported only by certain political factions and that it will be discarded by Minsk as soon as the constellation of forces in domestic Belarusian politics changes.

In order to persuade Russia that Belarusian neutrality is genuine, Minsk needs a military capacity which would guarantee that Belarus does not compromise Russian security

Likewise, in order to persuade Russia that Belarusian neutrality is genuine, Minsk needs a military capacity which would guarantee that Belarus does not compromise Russian security. To do that, Minsk needs more effective and sophisticated armed forces. Moreover, it has to pay attention to Russian security needs and sensitivities in building such armed forces, e.g., by establishing an appropriate air defence system. Even if Minsk could provide all these premises, Russia would most likely insist on a back-up mechanism of direct Russian military involvement if the Belarusian army should fail to stop a threat to Russia.

It is not impossible that such mechanisms, self-restraint and caution could undermine Belarusian neutrality and potentially destroy its independence. Yet, as Finland's experience has shown, this very model allowed Finland not only to survive but also maintain excellent relations with the Soviet Union and succeed as a nation.

6. Conclusion

So how can Belarusian foreign policy best be characterized? As putative neutrality or a softening of Russia's sphere of influence? A transient phenomenon or an emerging model of survival for the Belarusian state? Is this a mere reaction to external forces or the sincere belief of the Belarusian establishment finally being implemented after three decades of independence? This study provides no ultimate answers to these questions but hopes to contribute to new analyses and discussions on the subject matter.

With all due scepticism, there are elements in Belarusian foreign and national security policy which deserve to be analysed as probable elements of neutrality. Foreign policy especially provides a plethora of examples of this phenomenon over the past decade. In the early 2010s, national security policy began to take a turn in this direction as well.

Belarusian neutrality is being built ad hoc and thus suffers from poor media coverage and weak expert support. However, this could also be a tactic consciously adopted by the Belarusian government, in which it avoids defining the concept more clearly in order leave room for political manoeuvre.

The prospects of Belarusian neutrality still remain uncertain, as Minsk still needs recognition from the East and West. Neither Moscow, nor the West, nor neighbouring states seem to take Belarusian neutrality seriously.

Minsk, however, might have no other choice but "to go neutral". The Belarusian establishment also understands that it is becoming ever more risky to remain Russia's ally. At the same time, given the geographical location of Belarus, as well as its political economy and cultural ties with Russia, Minsk cannot simply "defect" to Western-dominated blocks and organisations.

The majority of Belarusians could be convinced to support neutrality, including significant segments of its political, economic and cultural elites. Other options might involve Belarus in internal political confrontations. Given Belarus's current position, which is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, neutrality might be the only way for the Belarusian state to survive, develop, and succeed.

About the authors

Siarhei Bohdan is an associate analyst at the Ostrogorski Centre. He is an alumnus of the Belarus State University and holds an MA degree from the European Humanities University in Lithuania. Siarhei comes from Maladzechna, Belarus. Contact him at: s.bohdan@ostrogorski.org.

Gumer Isayev is associate professor at the Süleyman Şah University in Istanbul, Turkey, until it was closed down due to political repression after the July 2016 coup attempt. He holds an MA and PhD degrees from the State Saint Petersburg University in Russia. Gumer comes from Saint Petersburg, Russia. Contact him at: gisaev@gmail.com.

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